

Titus 3:4-7

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Children are brilliant at asking big questions

- Where did I come from?
- Who made the world?
- Who made God?
- And thousands of ‘why?’ questions – are familiar to all parents and teachers

Inevitably because children want small answers to big questions

- They soon realise that they are not going to get the easy answers that they want
- And, at a certain age, they seem to stop asking these questions
- and parents and teachers alike breathe a great sigh of relief
- but that does not really mean that the questions have gone away

In our society, although the questions have not gone away

- it seems to me that – perhaps disillusioned with the answers given to children -
- the great majority of adults never learn (or re-learn) to ask the big questions
- Where did I come from? Why am I here?
- Who made the world? Is there a God? What is he like?
- Why do people die? What happens when you die?

It’s difficult to pin down the nationality of Arnold van Gennepe

- His father was Dutch, his mother was French
- But he was born at Ludwigsburg, in Württemberg, Germany
- With such a background it is not so surprising that he was a gifted linguist
- Though it is still remarkable that he learned 18 languages
- He is most remembered for his concept of ‘rites of passage’
- The idea that ritual actions move individuals from one social status to another

Without getting too technical as to what is properly called a ‘rite of passage’

- We all recognise some events as being important in life and celebrate these
- Birth, first day at school, passing examinations, going to college, learning to drive
- graduation, 18th/21st birthday, marriage, children, birthdays with a ‘0’ in them
- retirement, more birthdays with a ‘0’ or even two ‘00s’ in them and death
- are all significant occasions – if you don’t believe me, look in any greeting card shop
- some, if not all, of these occasions are accompanied by ritual or ceremony
- and each of these reflects the changing nature of the society in which we live
- if I were being controversial, I could say that today’s school prom.
- The ritual marking of the end of today’s teenager’s school-days
- Is the modern equivalent of their grandparents’ 21st birthday and marriage
- For about the same expense but without the sense of responsibility or fidelity
- But happily I am never controversial

In the Christian church, we also have ceremonies, 'rites of passage' if you like

- Initiation into all but a very few Christian denominations is through baptism
- Churches that baptise infants supplement such baptism with membership/confirmation
- What someone has humorously termed 'believer's baptism without water'
- Churches that baptise believing adults dedicate rather than Christen babies and infants
- What someone has humorously termed 'infant baptism without water'

In the Christian Church, baptism is generally conferred using the Trinitarian formula

- 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19)
- and this is not only biblical but it also affirms a fundamental belief
- there is one God – who is known in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- this is the one true God, who is revealed in the Holy Scriptures

Although the word 'Trinity' which comes from the Latin word *Trinitas* (three-ness)

- is not a word that appears in the Bible, it sums up the essential nature of God
- and is a short answer to difficult question, 'What is God like?'
- he is a being who exists eternally as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- but it is important for us to affirm that there is only one God

I THE UNITY OF THE GODHEAD

The fundamental teaching about God given in the Bible is that there is one God

- this is the centre piece of the Hebrew prayers known as the *Shema*
- *Shema* means 'hear'

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

(Deuteronomy 6:4)

Because the holy name of God is revered in the Hebrew tradition

- the holy name of God is expressed in English 'the LORD' (four capitals)
- but we could render the verse (using the traditional English 'Jehovah'):
- 'Hear, O Israel, Jehovah our God, Jehovah is one'
- or in the words given to the prophet Isaiah;

"This is what the LORD says - Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."

(Isaiah 44:6)

This conviction is affirmed in the New Testament and the writings of the apostle Paul

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

(1 Corinthians 8:4-5)

In short, divine power is not shared by several beings

- there is one true God (big G), all other supposed gods (g) are idols (1 Chron 16:26)

Nevertheless, Christians conclude from the Holy Scriptures

- that in the Godhead, three distinct and co-eternal 'persons' exist
- the word 'persons' (Gk *hypostases*) is not the most helpful for our understanding
- but we are pretty much stuck with it
- these distinct and co-eternal persons are of one indivisible, divine essence (substance)
- the one indivisible, divine essence or substance is described as 'consubstantial'
- God did not make himself known in three modes or forms
- But in three 'persons' each co-existing with the others
- Each eternal, each almighty, none greater or less than another
- Each God and yet together being but one God

The ancient theologians affirmed

- The Son is eternally begotten of the Father
- The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son
- As St Augustine (of Hippo) explains, in regard to Psalm 2:7
- "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"

"Thy years are one day, and Thy day is not daily, but today; because Thy today yields not to tomorrow, for neither does it follow yesterday. Thy today is eternity; therefore Thou begat the Co-eternal, to whom Thou saidst, 'This day have I begotten Thee.'"

In the first three centuries of the Christian Church

- The earliest Church Fathers (theologians and teachers) affirmed the Apostolic faith
- Through a time of persecution when attention was given to pastoral duties
- With the relaxing of persecution in 313 A.D. by the Edict of Milan
- The councils of the church were able to meet and formulate the creeds
- And the truths that the orthodox church had believed since the time of the apostles
- Which had used the baptismal formula, 'the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'
- And had affirmed Christ's deity

My graduation in the University of Wales was a very interesting experience for me

- Being the only candidate in the degree congregation in my class
- I was personally addressed by the principal conferring the degree
- You might think that was a great honour and in some ways I suppose it was
- The trouble was that as this long paragraph was all in Welsh
- It was hard to retain a demeanour of wrapt attention
- Nevertheless, despite not understanding any, let alone all of it
- My acceptance of this framework and this ritual was essential to my graduation

I have more than a hunch that today's Christians do not ponder the Trinity too deeply

- I don't know if that is because we want simple answers to big questions
- But I am relieved that we are not confined to the theory alone (Ontological Trinity)
- But that we can think about what the doctrine means to us (Economic Trinity)
- And how the one God, in three persons, acts with respect to creation, history
- Salvation, the formation of the church and the daily lives of believers
- Like just about every important Christian doctrine it is a matter of revelation
- (what God makes known), mystery, faith and Christian living

And so after what I concede has been a long and technical introduction and first point

- we can turn to our scriptural text – which we read in terms of the Economic Trinity
- that is how God is acting in the world, particularly with regard to saving us

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

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From this text it becomes clear that the coming of Jesus Christ

- and the presence and power of God among them (particular the power of Pentecost)
- had implications for the New Testament Christians

An important theme in each of the four gospels is the identity of Jesus Christ

- the fourth gospel, commonly attributed to John, begins with the magisterial prologue

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

(John 1:1-2)

As the prologue unfolds, we can come to no other conclusion than that Jesus is the Word

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

It is a revelation of:

II THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

What John describes in one way in the gospel

- the apostle Paul relates in another when writing to Titus

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‘But’ is one of Paul’s favourite words

- it often points to a contrast between what the believer once was
- and what the believer is through saving faith in Jesus Christ

Salvation is rooted in a definite historical event

- when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared
- in Chapter 3:4, Paul is using the same word 'appeared' as Chapter 2:11
- it is God's kindness and love that have appeared – but not in abstract terms
- but in person in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
- the word translated 'love' is better translated (as KJV) 'love toward man'
- God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ – in his incarnation
- But his saving work is accomplished by his death on the cross
- notice how Paul does not render this 'the Saviour' but 'our Saviour'
- this is the faith of believing Christians
- And all who accept God's saving work in Christ on the cross, now have this salvation
- A salvation that will be completely accomplished when Jesus comes in glory

The order in which Paul expresses this is significant

- not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy
- there is no place for any merit, other than the dying merits of Jesus Christ
- it is all of God's sovereign grace
- God saves his people 'because of his mercy'

The Bible uses 'Father' as a title both for God (in the sense of Father, Son and Holy Spirit)

- And as a designation for the first person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father
- We should not be too worried about this, or about doing the same ourselves
- For the Father and Son are one (John 10:30)
- Nevertheless, it is because of the Father's great mercy
- That through the Son, kindness and love have appeared and been made known
- The Father saves us through the gift of his Son

God the Father is divine

- And so is God the Eternal Son, incarnate (that is 'in flesh') in Jesus Christ
- Before his earthly ministry, Jesus is introduced as the Word, eternal and divine
- Through his earthly ministry both his full humanity and full divinity shine through
- At the end of his earthly ministry, after the resurrection, when he appeared to Thomas
- Jesus is worshipped – as Lord and God (John 20:28)

It is only the doctrine of the Trinity that enables us to understand

- How both God the Father, whom we associate with creation
- And Jesus, God the Son, whom we associate with redemption
- Can be one in essence and yet separate in person

But Paul continues by elaborating on the role of the Holy Spirit

- Who is sent as an advocate for believers – to bring us to holiness (that is like Jesus)
- Providing an assurance of the presence and power of God
- Again the main subject of the sentence 'he' is the heavenly Father
- He saved us, through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit
- Whom he (the Father) poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour
- And this washing of rebirth and renewal – was for a purpose: to justify by grace
- So that we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life
- In this saving work, we see the 'economic Trinity' God, three-in-one in action

III THE PERSONALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The importance for the first Christians of their faith in God whom they called Father

- In Jesus Christ, whom they saw as Eternal Word of God, Son of God, Lord, Saviour
- And in the Holy Spirit is shown by passages linking Father, Son and Spirit together
- Not least the baptismal formula that we associate with the Great Commission
- And in the apostle Paul's great prayer that we call 'The grace' (2 Cor. 13:14)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Just as the Son is of one substance with the Father

- So the Spirit is of one substance with the Father and the Son
- Expressed simply, the answer to the question, 'What is God?'
- Indicates the unity of the divine nature – there is one God
- The answer to the question, 'Who is God?'
- Indicates the Trinity of the divine nature – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- There was no time before Jesus entered the world that he did not exist
- There was no time before the Spirit was known that he did not exist

The apostle Paul's greatest work is undoubtedly his letter to the Romans

- Paul clearly states that the gospel is the gospel of God (Romans 1:1)
- He continues by saying it is the gospel of his Son (Romans 1:9)
- But, interestingly, the role of the Holy Spirit is a personal and intimate one
- Providing assurance of the believer's sonship as a child of God (Romans 8:16)

The Father saves the believer through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit

- The Holy Spirit is poured out through Jesus Christ our Saviour
- It is difficult to separate the regeneration and renewal
- And with the word 'washing' it is hard not to think of Christian baptism
- Nevertheless, this washing is wholly spiritual
- For although the baptismal water points to the inward washing
- It is clearly limited to a visible, external washing and cannot extend inwardly
- The means of salvation are the inward washing, the regeneration and renewing
- Regeneration is simply another way of expressing the new birth, start of the new life
- Represented by, but not identical to, baptism
- The agent of the washing, regeneration and renewing is not the water
- But the Holy Spirit, given by the Father, through Jesus Christ our Saviour
- For it is the Spirit and Word that cleanse us, on the basis of the blood of Christ
- It goes against the whole thrust of New Testament teaching to think
- That a material agency is the means of producing a spiritual result
- Our faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour makes us ready to receive the Holy Spirit
- And where sin (unbelief and disobedience) had brought guilt and condemnation
- Faith results in obedience and brings justification and righteousness
- So the believer is not saved by good works but saved to do good works
- By the grace of God, the believer becomes an heir, having the hope of eternal life

Here then is the Holy Trinity working for the salvation of men and women

- God has always loved
- Eternally, the Holy God has existed perfectly
- In one substance (divine essence) and in three persons
- One God, the Father, who created through the Son and by the Spirit
- The Son, eternally divine, Saviour, redeemer, Lord and God
- The Spirit, personal, and giving the new birth and the new life that we may be holy